FOUND—CALLED
January 27, 2008

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Psalm 27:1–9
Genesis 12:1–4a
Matthew 4:12–23

"He saw two other brothers, James . . . and his brother John,
in the boat with their father . . . and he called them.
Immediately they left the boat and their father,
and followed him."
Matthew 4:21,22 (NRSV)

There are no experts in the company of Jesus. We are all beginners, necessarily followers, because we don't know where we are going. On reflection, it is difficult to understand
how the term "laity" and the assumptions drawn from it continue to marginalize
so many Christians from all-out participation in following Jesus. After all,
didn't Jesus call only lay persons to follow him? Not a priest or professor
among the twelve men and numerous women followers.

Eugene H. Peterson
The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways Jesus is the Way

One of the most beloved American poems is "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost. Some of us can remember the distinguished poet, his white hair blowing in the wind, reading a poem on a cold January morning at the inauguration of John F. Kennedy and then, three years later, reading a poem at his funeral.

"The Road Not Taken" has been my companion over the years, as it has for many people, I am sure. It's about a traveler walking through the woods, coming to a fork in the path. He looks at one and then the other. One seems to be more traveled than the other. He ponders his decision: which road to take?

And in the concluding lines, the poet speaks powerfully about the human experience of many of us:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The story of Christian faith begins when a young man one day leaves his home, sets out on an adventure, takes “the road less traveled.” It is such an inconspicuous detail in the narrative that you can almost miss it. Matthew says simply “Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea.”

Think of the dynamics that must lie behind that simple statement. A young man about thirty years old, working in a carpenter shop, responsible for the care of his widowed mother and his younger brothers and sisters, announces one day that he’s leaving, leaving the business, leaving the security of a regular income, leaving the care of his family. It’s just a small detail in the narrative, but it contains enormous and familiar human feeling and passion.

William Willimon, for years chaplain at Duke University, remembers a parents weekend when the visiting preacher in the chapel had just read about Jesus calling the disciples, looked out at the congregation of undergraduates and parents, and “noted, with more than a touch of sadness,” that “Jesus broke the hearts of many a first-century family.” Willimon says that in his more than twenty years as Duke’s chaplain he had maybe twenty angry telephone calls from parents. “Never did they say, ‘Help. I sent my child to the university and he got addicted to alcohol,’ or ‘Help. I sent my child to college and she became sexually promiscuous.’ No, the calls I got were, ‘Help. I sent my child to Duke and she became a religious fanatic.’ Religious fanatic defined as ‘she’s going on a two-year mission to Haiti with the Catholics’” (*Thank God It’s Friday*, p. 30).

It begins when something stirs in a young man’s heart, and he moves, begins an unlikely adventure. And it continues as the same thing immediately happens again. Walking along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, he sees two brothers, Peter and Andrew. “Follow me,” he says, and they “left their nets and followed him.” And then two more, James and John, in the boat with their father: “Follow me,” and immediately they followed.

How most of us came to be who we are was the result of a long process of discernment, weighing all the options, maybe over several

years. Maybe we're still doing it, trying to decide what we will do with the rest of our lives. For most of us, at least, it was a little more complicated and complex and ambiguous than "'Follow me' and they left their nets and followed." But at some point we had to decide to get up from what we were doing and move.

What the Bible is taking about in these small vignettes is actually faith. The Bible says faith is hearing the voice, the voice of God if you will, the call of Christ, and stepping out onto the road and following. It's not how we define faith mostly, but it is there from the very beginning, when an elderly couple, Abraham and Sarah, comfortable, wealthy, settled, hear a voice. "Go from your country," the voice says. "Leave your family, your native land, your comfort and security." "And Abraham went." That, the Bible says, is what faith is. Centuries later, St. Paul is still talking about Abraham as a man of faith, an exemplar, an example of what faith is. It's a matter of getting up from where you are and following.

We are inclined, rational children of the Enlightenment, however, to define religious faith intellectually, as a list of ideas we believe to be true. In a recent interview, Barbara Brown Taylor observed that she had been "brought up with a definition of faith as 'adherence to a set of beliefs' but now she says, she is redefining faith as 'openness to truth' whatever truth turns out to be." If faith is adherence to a set of beliefs, we can draw a line between those who are in and those who are not, those who believe and those who do not, those who can and those who can't. If faith is adherence to a list of beliefs, we can struggle with those beliefs and set ourselves to the challenge of finally working our way to a position of intellectual agreement. Or we can tell ourselves that we don't belong in church because we can't affirm all the beliefs. And we can have a fine old time arguing and fighting one another about whose list of beliefs is the real and authentic one and which is watered down, heretical. We've made a game of it for 2,000 years, and we're still at it.

I do not mean to denigrate theology, the disciplined academic pursuit of truth, the "study of God." In fact, we Presbyterians are better at that than almost anyone. From the beginning we have specialized in education, higher education, church education, adult education. Ours is a faith seeking understanding, and we continue to believe and support the notion that Christian faith need not shrink from nor be threatened by the university, the free pursuit of truth. We really believe that we are called to love God with our minds as well as our hearts.

But we do need to remember that it all begins not with a list of beliefs to adhere to, not with a creed, but with a voice saying, “Follow me.” It begins not with a theological examination but with a summons: “Follow me.”

Now I wish we knew more about what was going on with Peter and Andrew, James and John. I wonder if they knew Jesus. I wonder if they had heard him speak, had searching, in-depth conversations with him about the meaning of life. I wonder what was going on in their personal lives. Were they restless, frustrated, unhappy with the status quo? Were they bored? Did James and John feel oppressed and constrained by their father Zebedee’s demands, his rigid, unbending sense that his was the only way to cast a net, row a boat, clean a fish?

We don’t, of course, know any of that. Maybe the decision to follow came after a lot of struggling and hoping and doubting. That’s the way it is for most of us, I believe. We don’t know. All we know is that for them faith begins when they hear a voice, a summons, and decide to get up and follow.

Notice that the initiative is his, not theirs. Jesus comes to them. Comes to them where they are, working. Michael Lindvall, in his fine little book *A Geography of God*, observes that “Jesus’ disciples do not appear to be God-haunted religious searchers. When he found them, not a one of them was at prayer in the synagogue. They were not searching for God: they were at their nets and counting tables” (pp. 10–11).

Sometimes we think religious faith is our search for God, for meaning, for truth to live by. And in a sense, that is true. It is a noble and admirable quest. But an even more profound truth is that the initiative in this search is God’s, not ours. God comes to us. God creates the need, the hunger and thirst for truth and authenticity and meaning in us. God creates a “God-sized hole” deep in the heart of every one of us and will not ever let us go.

Michael Lindvall writes, “People speculate about the search for God, as if the Transcendent One were a set of misplaced car keys. The awkward truth is that it is we who have misplaced ourselves. The journey of faith,” Michael says, “is not so much to ‘find God’ as it is a struggle to follow a God who finds us” (p. 10).

I believe God calls us in the context of our lives, not when we are being religious, saying our prayers, singing our hymns, or listening to sermons even, but while we are at our nets, working, living, loving, parenting, making decisions about who to vote for, how to spend our

resources. I believe God comes to us and calls us in those matters about which we are most passionate, our deepest and dearest loves, our strongest concerns and commitments, our most precious hopes and dreams.

Bob Abernethy has edited a new book, *The Life of Meaning*, a collection of interviews with a wide variety of people about "Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World." I was taken by Dr. Rachel Remen's reflections about being a physician: "I often wonder if this work is actually a calling," she says.

> Perhaps there is something about the way we are made inside that has brought us to this profession. The people who do this work move toward situations that many people would avoid and pull back from. When someone is in trouble or great need, especially someone you do not know, a lot of people pull back or look the other way. But the people who go into medicine have a different sort of response. They are magnetized toward such situations. . . . They recognize that somehow they belong in places of need and trouble. (pp. 25–29)

God comes, Christ calls us to follow, in the events and relationships and encounters and challenges of our daily lives. Not just to clergy, by the way. That is one of the great and tragic misunderstandings: the notion that God calls people to professional ministry and everyone else is on their own to make vocational decisions, decisions about how to live and whom to follow. There are no priests, no ministers, among the first disciples, someone observed. There are no clergy or laity; just men and women called to be disciples, to get up and follow.

God does not force the issue. In God's good grace, we are free to ignore the call of God, free to spend our lives trying to avoid it. God knows, many of us tried that. I did. And the truth is that God never gives up, never stops calling, urging, prodding, nagging until we finally say yes.

It is grace finally. Eugene Peterson says that "Jesus is our way to God, but at the same time Jesus is God's way to us" (*The Jesus Way*, p. 37).

Victor Hugo's great novel *Les Miserables*, and the Broadway musical based on the book, is, in part, the story of a spiritual journey. Jean Valjean is an ex-convict, having served a sentence of nineteen years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread. As the novel opens, he is out of prison finally but is lost and hungry and cold. He is given shelter and food by a kind and generous bishop. During the night he awakens, steals the bishop's silver, and runs away. He is captured by the police,

brought back to the bishop's residence in shame to return the stolen pieces of silver. But before anyone can say a word, the bishop greets Jean Valjean: "There you are. I'm glad to see you. But I gave you the candlesticks also. . . . Why did you not take them along with the plates?"

He wasn't searching for anything but food, a place to sleep, and he was tracked down and found by a kindly grace that literally transformed his life (see Michael Lindvall, p. 12).

God comes to each of us in the voice of Christ. Some need to respond by leaving home and going to seminary. Some need to leave home and go to law school or medical school or business school. Some need to stay home and continue doing what they are doing, going to work, taking care of business, diapering the babies, cooking the meals, arguing the case, teaching the class, closing the deal. But all of us are called to a new place, a new life shaped by him, to new values informed by him, to new justice and hope and love—lived in the world in his name and for his sake.

John Newton got it right. An eighteenth-century British sea captain plying the slave trade, Newton was accosted by God working through his conscience, became a Christian, then an Anglican priest, inspired William Wilberforce, and worked tirelessly to abolish slavery in Great Britain. He wrote what has become the most popular, most beloved hymn in the English language. I'm convinced it's because of one wonderful line:

> Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
> that saved a wretch like me!
> I once was lost, but now am found,
> was blind, but now I see.

Once lost—now found. That's the way it is with God and with us: God and Abraham and Sarah. Jesus and Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Jesus Christ and you and me. You don't have to have it all worked out intellectually, don't have to have pat answers to all of life's big and troublesome questions. He invites us to follow him, with whatever beliefs we have.

As he walked by the sea, he saw two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, casting a net into the sea. "Follow me," he said, "and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

> Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

(“The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost)